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Dear C'T State Legislators:

I am writing in support of SB ~~657~~⁴⁵⁹ Drug Free School Zones. The passage of this bill is long overdue. As a public health researcher and anthropologist with a research focus on substance use and prevention among youth living in the Greater Hartford region, I wish to highlight the overwhelming research both locally and nationally, which shows the devastating effects that the war on drugs has had on inner-city communities in CT. Although national research consistently shows that drug use is equally prevalent among Whites and people of color, the drug war has focused on urban communities of color contributing to racial disparities in incarceration rates and a host of other negative social and health outcomes.

The State of Connecticut has the highest rate of disproportionate incarceration in the country for Latinos and the fourth highest rate for African Americans (OLR 2009). By far the highest incarceration rates in CT are in the more densely populated cities of Bridgeport, New Haven and Hartford and peri-urban areas such as New Britain, which also have high percentages of minority residents. Research shows that one reason for the racial disparities in incarceration is the much denser concentrations of "drug-free zones" surrounding schools, public housing and daycare centers within urban areas compared with most suburban or rural areas. The combined effects of targeted policing in urban areas and mandatory minimums sentences for drug arrests within designated "drug-free zones" has led to urban minorities facing far greater likelihood of arrest on drug charges and far stiffer sentences compared with Whites engaged in the same types of illegal drug activity.

The "Drug-free School Zone Law" as it exists today in CT does not function to protect children from drug dealers. Research has shown that the majority of arrestees convicted of violating this law were in fact using or dealing drugs within their homes, often in public housing. In arrest data for drug sales and possession from the Division of State Police from July 1, 2004-July 31, 2005, only 3 cases were actually linked to schools and 7 in 8 arrests took place outside of normal school hours (the Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee, 2005).

Current data from 2010 shows that drug arrests accounted for 17.3% of the total incarcerated population. This number does not include the additional 12% of individuals incarcerated for Violation of Probation, many of which are also likely related to drug offenses or failed drug tests. Earlier research from 2005 showed that of 300 randomly sampled mandatory minimum drug cases, almost all of the arrests—95%—took place in "drug-free zones." One would expect reductions in the number of individuals sentenced to prison, or at the very least, the duration of their sentences, for the majority of individuals with drug-related offenses. This could mean significant savings in prison costs as well as reductions in the collateral damages caused to families and children as a result of losing a spouse or a parent to jail.

If one wants to understand the devastating effects the drug war has had on African Americans in the U.S., one has only to consider the staggering statistics presented by law professor and civil rights activist, Michelle Alexander. There are more African Americans under correctional control today than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began. As of 2004, more African American men were disenfranchised (due to felon disenfranchisement laws) than in 1870, the year the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified. A black child today is less likely to be raised by both parents than a black child born during slavery. The recent disintegration of the African American family is due in large part to the mass imprisonment of black fathers and policies connected to the War on Drugs. A large percentage of Black men have

been labeled felons for life. (In the Chicago area, the figure is nearly 80%, in DC it is around 50%). As Alexander writes, "These men are part of a growing undercaste -- not class, caste -- permanently relegated, by law, to a second-class status. They can be denied the right to vote, automatically excluded from juries, and legally discriminated against in employment, housing, access to education, and public benefits, much as their grandparents and great-grandparents were during the Jim Crow era." (Alexander 2010).

Latinos in CT have suffered unjustly as well, although there has been less attention given to the impact of the drug war in Latino communities. According to the Sentencing Project, on any given day in the U.S., more than one out of every three Black males between the ages of 18-29 are either incarcerated, on probation or parole, or under warrant for arrest. The figure for Latinos is one in six. For whites, it is one in twenty. In most major cities, the numbers are much higher. Changing our drug policies to ensure they are enforced more equally across racial and geographical divisions in the U.S. is the only way to begin to rectify this horrible injustice.

As U.S. Attorney General Holder recently stated in a speech to the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives cited in the Tampa Tribune, "It's time to face facts about our current approach to incarceration. It's not sustainable. It's not affordable. And we've seen that it isn't always as effective as we think in reducing crime and keeping Americans safe," The revised Drug-free School Zone law proposed by SB 475 will help alleviate the disproportionate incarceration rates, which have wreaked havoc on many low-income urban families and communities. The revised law will also help CT balance its budget, leading to reduced prison costs to the state and its citizens. It is an absolute waste of money and human capital, not to mention a violation of basic human rights, to lock up non-violent drug offenders in jail.

Sincerely,

Sarah Diamond

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